

# Small Shop - Big Results



## Pinblock Installation Follow-up: Tending to the Finishing Touches

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Having completed the pinblock panel installation on the Weber grand in my shop, one important detail needed to be attended to before the cast iron plate was returned to the piano in preparation for repinning and restringing the piano. Although the soundboard had received considerable attention and looked good from the top, from the underside it was a different story altogether. Much work needed to be done.



*Photo 1: Shimmed soundboard.*

To back up a bit, the soundboard of the Weber had proven to require considerably more work to remedy than what I had bargained for when I gave the original estimate. When the piano was examined in the home it was summer and the board appeared tight – a few hairline cracks in evidence, but nothing to be concerned about. However, in the shop when winter arrived cracks started to appear – many more than I expected. Since I have neither the equipment nor the experience to replace soundboards as of yet, shimming is treatment I offer.

Aside from the sheer number of shims to put in, there was nothing remarkable about their installation. Though I had sanded the top side smooth in preparation for a shellac finish (Photo 1), viewed from underneath the piano was unsightly, to say the least. When the piano was delivered to the home on its side, this back view would be exposed and unacceptable (Photo 2).



*Photo 2: Yikes!*

On occasions when a few discreet shims have been applied to an otherwise ship-shape board, the trimming and touchup on the underside may be accomplished without any extraordinary measures. Roll up from underneath on your creeper, work at it for a half hour or, and you're ready to go.



*Photo 3: Flipped.*

On a piano with a number of soundboard shims, however, it makes more sense to turn the piano over (before the cast iron plate is installed, of course) than to go at it from underneath. To turn the piano over, have at least one other person in the shop to help, and use a portable engine hoist and a couple of heavy duty straps to do the actual lifting. A three step process works well to get the job done. First, lower the piano right-side up onto a pair of blanket-encased cross beams resting on the floor. Next, reposition the hoist and tilt the piano up so that its long side rests on the beams. Finally, with one more reattachment of the hoist lower the piano down with the underside exposed (Photo 3).



*Photo 4: Button being sanded.*

If the old finish of the backside of the soundboard needs refinishing, the first step is to remove any buttons which will be in the way of scraping off the old shellac. Unscrew the screw in the middle of the button, and usually they will pop off with a slight blow from a mallet and chisel. Before putting these aside for the time being, sand the old finish off so that they might be refinished before reinstalling. To make a quick job of stripping these, simply run a long flat-head wood screw through the center hole, and chuck them in a drill (Photo 4). By running the drill at a slow speed and holding a folded sheet of sandpaper (150 grit, followed by 220), the job will take less than a minute per button.



*Photo 5: Chiseling the shims flush.*

For spruce shims that protrude through the soundboard, use a very sharp chisel with the flat edge to the board (Photo 5) to cut the protruding v of the shim off flush. Once the shims have been trimmed flush, you may also use the chisel to scrape off the bulk of the finish, if refinishing is desired. Hold the chisel (1" wide or wider) at a 90

degree angle to the board with the beveled edge away from you, and drag over the finish while exerting a downward pressure. Be careful not to let the corners of the chisel gouge the wood of the soundboard. Ribs may also be scraped clean of finish in this manner.

Once the majority of the old finish has been removed in this manner, final stripping may be accomplished with sandpaper, either folded into a small pad, or wrapped around a small wooden block.



*Photo 6: Sanding the soundboard.*

Whenever possible, work your sandpaper in the direction of the grain. In some places, however, where the ribs or framework limit your motion, you may have to go against the grain (Photo 6). When this is the case, if you use a finer grit of paper and take a bit longer to finish the sanding, you'll have less of a problem with cut marks crossing the grain of the wood.



*Photo 7: Underside completely stripped and sanded.*

If it seems necessary, you may want to strip the frame posts and the inside of the rim as well as the soundboard. In the case of this particular piano, I had not anticipated the soundboard requiring nearly as much work as it did, but having gone this far, it felt right to finish off the job so that it looked good from both top and bottom.



*Photo 8: Applying the new finish by brush.*

With the old finish removed, and every thing sanded, apply your finish of choice. My preference here was to apply three coats of shellac on all exposed surfaces.



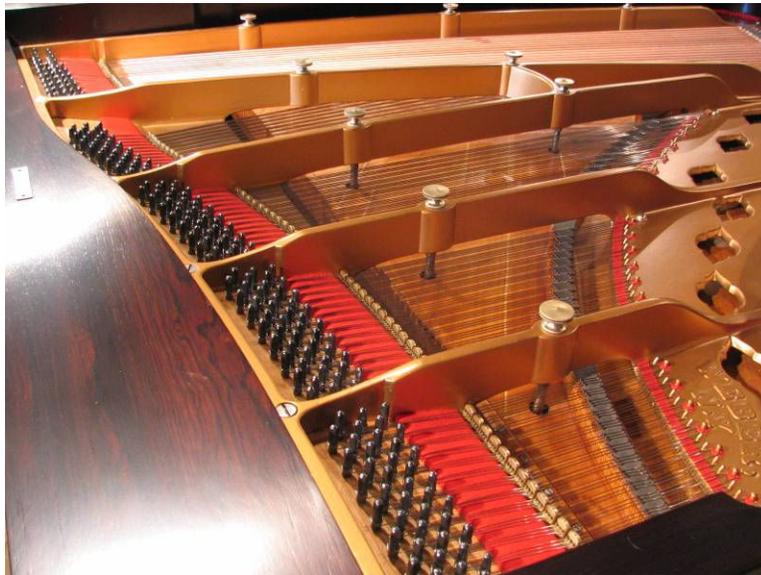
*Photo 9: Refinished underside.*

Compare the appearance of the underneath side of the piano in Photo 9 with what the same surface looked like before the work was done (Photo 2). To me, it's worth the effort, in that there's now nothing to be embarrassed about.



*Photo 10: In goes the plate.*

With the underside of the piano now in good shape, it's time to turn the piano back over, and install the plate (Photo 9). Many jobs may remain, but a significant milestone has been reached. The piano at this point is going back together, and the work is all downhill from here on out (Photo 11).



*Photo 11: Things come together.*

As a final thought, I've come to realize that for folks who operate a piano shop, there are the skills one currently has, and the skills one hopes to have at some point in the future. Very few shop owners that I've ever visited with are able to do everything they wish to be able to do. For me, the installation of a new soundboard is still beyond the horizon in terms of what I'm able to offer my customer. I realize that by learning the ins

and out of that particular procedure such problems as dealing with the unattractive appearance of shims on the underside of the piano would go away. But until that time, I'll do the absolute best job that I can with the procedures I do know.

Therein, I believe, is the secret of a successful shop. Take pride in the work that you do, no matter how advanced the level that you're at, and at the end of the day you will be satisfied, knowing that you've done your best work. If you have that philosophy, work is bound to find its way to your door.

As always, stop by to visit if you find yourself in the area. The coffee pot's on.

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